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**Pope, S. & Kirk, D. 'The role of physical education and other formative experiences of three generations of female football fans'. In *Sport, Education and Society*. Published 2014.**

# **The role of physical education and other formative experiences of three generations of female football fans**

## **Abstract**

The experiences of female sports fans have been largely marginalized in academic research to date and little research has examined the formative sporting experiences of female spectators. This paper draws on 51 semi-structured interviews with three generations of female fans of one (men's) professional football club (Leicester City), to consider the extent to which sports participation at school and elsewhere influences female football fandom, and also explores the influence of the family in channelling young females into or away from sport. We begin by examining the extent to which women had opportunities to experience football at school and how the type of school they attended affected these opportunities. We consider continuities and discontinuities between each generation's experiences by examining the influence of sexist teachers, the ubiquity of what the women viewed as 'body conscious girls' and the effects of peer pressure. Finally, we examine the ways in which families obstructed or facilitated young females' interest in football, and the importance of mainly male role models within and beyond the family. We conclude with some reflections on feminist praxis and its relevance for young people's formative sporting experiences.

**Keywords:** *Football; Physical Education; Girls; Fans; Femininity*

## **Introduction**

The experiences of female sports fans have been largely neglected in academic research, despite the fact that women now make up a substantial minority of fans of the most popular professional sport in Britain, men's football. In England, female football fans are estimated to make up around 19 percent of all Premier League fans and just under one quarter (24 percent) at Leicester City, the case study we will report in this paper (Premier League Website, accessed on 28th April 2011; Williams, 2004). Moreover, football has now overtaken netball as the most popular team sport for women in England and is in the top ten overall sports (Women's Sport and Fitness Foundation Website, accessed on 3<sup>rd</sup> May 2011).

There is also a dearth of detailed empirical research on the role of young people's formative sporting experiences in shaping their wider engagement with sport, both as fans and

participants. Research suggests that, despite a rise in young people's participation in sport and other physical activities since the 1970s, girls and women continue to be less physically active than boys and men (e.g. Smith *et al.*, 2004). This is the case for females as a group compared with males, and is more pronounced for some groups of girls and women when we also take into account other factors such as social class, ethnicity and religion (Flintoff, 2008). There is also evidence to suggest that, in some cases, girls actively resist school physical education and sport, particularly in their early teens and continuing through the final years of compulsory schooling (Flintoff & Scraton, 2006). Given the persistence and widespread occurrence of gender inequity in physical education and sport during the formative years of childhood and adolescence, is it possible to explain sports fandom among women, particularly when the sport is a flagship of hegemonic masculinity (Harris, 2004), men's professional football?

Drawing on 51 semi-structured interviews with three generations of female football fans of Leicester City, this paper examines the extent to which sports participation at school influences female football fandom. It also aims to explore the influence of the family in channelling young females' engagement with sport in general and football in particular. In addressing these issues, we are also interested to learn the extent that there are changes and continuities between the experiences of three generations of women who attended school respectively in the 1940s to 1960s, the 1970s and 1980s, and the 1990s and 2000s.

We begin by outlining constructions of masculinities and femininities, theories of gender equity and some of the existing research on female sports fans, which serves as a theoretical framework for our paper. We then provide an overview of the methods employed for the study. Setting out our findings, we begin by revealing the extent to which the women fans

had opportunities to experience football at school. We consider the extent to which the types of school they attended affected their opportunities to experience football. We note continuities and discontinuities between each generation's experiences as we report the women's recollections of the influence of popular ideologies of gender, the influence of sexist teachers, the ubiquity of what they viewed as 'body conscious girls', and the effects of peer pressure within a 'culture of femininity'. Finally, we consider how family members may socialize young girls' into or away from sporting interests, and the importance of mainly male role models.

### **Constructions of masculinities and femininities and theories of gender equity**

Sport has played a crucial role in sustaining the privileged position of manliness in Western societies (Whitson, 1990). From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century sport helped to define male sexuality as distinct from female sexuality, thus celebrating the differences between men and women and emphasizing male superiority (Crossett, 1990). This fitted well, of course, with the social and cultural separation of the male and female spheres which accelerated during the Victorian period. Men were popularly associated with culture, rationality, reason, and the physical, so were deemed to be 'more suited' to action in the public sphere. Women were popularly associated with nature, irrationality, emotion and passivity, so were largely subordinated to the private sphere (see Prokhovnik, 1999).

These developments would have also aided the 'natural' segregation by sex in sport. Biological determinism was used to channel women away from sport, with Social Darwinism proving 'scientifically' to the Victorians, in sport and elsewhere, that women were biologically inferior to men. Whereas sport played an important role in developing a sense of 'manliness' and male identity, claims about the frailty of women's bodies linked strenuous

games with ill health and potential damage to reproductive organs (McCrone, 1987). Women's roles were to be 'good wives and mothers' and thus, physical exertion beyond these roles was deemed unnatural for women (Parker, 1996). Women's roles certainly did not involve playing – or even watching – 'male' team sports such as football or rugby.

The notion of female inferiority was also accompanied by an ideology of male biological superiority which continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Crossett, 1990). The belief that women's biology prevents them from competing in the 'male realm' persisted and attempts have been made to confine women to those sports believed to be conducive to femininity, such as swimming and gymnastics (Kidd, 1990). But this exclusion of females from sport began to be more strongly challenged in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

From the late 1960s and into the 1970s and 1980s, the liberal individual rights and equal opportunity agenda was taken up by the mainstream of the modern feminist movement (Messner & Sabo, 1990). This focused on equality of access and challenged females' lack of sporting opportunities (Scruton & Flintoff, 2002). For Flintoff (2008) the majority of feminist praxis in physical education and sport falls into what Walby (2000) has termed a politics of equality or a politics of recognition. A new challenge for feminism has been how we can recognise differences amongst girls' experiences but at the same time acknowledge the continuing inequities they face as a group. Flintoff argues that by accounting for differences through the adoption of a politics of equality approach, teachers work with the assumption that the current practice of physical education is acceptable for girls and the provision simply needs to be made more 'girl friendly'. But there are also problems with adopting a politics of recognition approach as by embracing difference existing inequalities may be reinforced. For

example, introducing curriculum activities for girls such as aerobics will not challenge the higher status of so-called boys' activities.

Flintoff (2008) contends that it is the continuing dominance of a masculine competitive sport discourse that undermines teachers' best efforts to reform physical education in ways that will benefit all pupils, not just girls. Her findings show how the approach adopted by teachers today continues to be one of 'equal opportunities and access' and this has meant largely access to competitive sport activities. Many activities revolved around inter-school competitions in a narrow range of traditional team sports, including football and cricket. Flintoff claims that girls were largely alienated by this masculine competitive sport discourse, a view we wish to reconsider through the phenomenon of female sports fandom.

The experiences of female sports fans have been largely marginalized in academic research to date (Gosling, 2007). Much research – especially on football fans – has focussed on male hooligan cultures (see, for example, Armstrong & Giulianotti, 1997; Spaaij, 2008), or the importance of football in constructing 'lads' identities (see King, 2002). Only a handful of studies have explored the experiences of female football fans, and these are often centred upon how women negotiate their position within the male-dominated space of the football ground (see, for example, Jones, 2008). Studies have also examined stereotypes of women as 'inauthentic' supporters, whose primary interest in sport is reduced to a (hetero)sexual interest in male players (Crawford & Gosling, 2004).

Clark and Paechter (2007) have suggested that much research on femininity and football has focused upon adult women and so there is a need for further research to explore *girls'* experiences of football. There is little existing research, however, of the impact of sports

participation in physical education and elsewhere on young people's future consumption of sport, as sports fans. The relative lack of research on the socialisation experiences of female football fans and the role of sports spectatorship in physical education thus provide further impetus for this paper. We would argue that since sport is undeniably a social institution, a cultural practice, and an industry of huge importance, it could be suggested that physical education has a legitimate, indeed vital, role to play in assisting young people to become informed and discerning consumers of sport.

### **The research**

The findings for this paper have been extracted from a wider comparative project on female fans of men's professional football (Leicester City) and rugby union (Leicester Tigers) in Leicester (Pope, 2010). In this paper we are drawing primarily on the data from the Leicester City supporters, with occasional reference made to the wider study. Following the dearth of empirical research on female sports fans (Mewett & Toffoletti, 2008), this study aimed to examine how sports fandom figures in the leisure lives of women, bringing women's experiences as sports spectators, both past and present, to the fore.

Our findings are based on 51 semi-structured interviews conducted with three generations of female football fans between 2006 and 2007. The sampling frame used to select respondents was a postal questionnaire survey (Williams, 2004), and potential interviewees were divided into three broad age groups using the age delineations from the survey. Systematic sampling techniques (selecting every fifth questionnaire return) were used to select potential interviewees and the final sample was made up of 10 'younger group' fans aged 20-27, 25 'middle group' fans aged 28-59 and 16 'older group' supporters who were over 60 years old. All interviews were conducted by the first author of this paper and typically took place in the



homes or workplaces of respondents. These averaged around two hours in length, with a small number verging on life story or life history interviews, lasting closer to four hours.

### *Analysis of interview data*

An interview schedule was designed which was divided into eight different themes or issues. This covered topic areas such as how respondents first became a fan, experiences of attending matches today, and views on women as fans. The interviews were semi-structured to ensure that certain topics would be covered, whilst also allowing some latitude to ask further questions in response to interesting replies from the interviewee (Bryman, 2004). Glaser and Strauss's (2008) 'grounded theory' approach was adopted in data collection and analysis. After fully transcribing the interviews, the eight different sections of the interview schedule served as an effective base from which to code the data, drawing upon the constant comparative method. The interviews were typically rich in detail, covering a wide range of issues and events that had shaped the lives of respondents, and explored the feelings and experiences of female fans across their lifetimes (Atkinson, 2002). Here we focus on female football fans' early experiences of sport during school age years.

### *The fans*

The final sample consisted of women from a range of occupational backgrounds. Local fan surveys have shown that the football club draws on a large working class and lower middle class constituency (Williams, 2004), and although this was largely confirmed by our sample, a few respondents were from the AB socio-economic groups. Although Leicester is an ethnically diverse city, minority ethnic fans still feature very poorly as part of the football crowd and, as a result, nearly all the female respondents were white. Many of the interviewees were Season Ticket Holders (STH's) who attend all home matches or club

members who attend the majority of home matches, but there were also some occasional attendees.

When discussing female fans' early experiences of sport at school, generally speaking it can be said that: younger group women are referring mostly to experiences in the 1990s and 2000s; middle group respondents are discussing experiences in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s; and the older group women refer mostly to the 1940s and 1950s, and in a few cases the early 1960s. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant anonymity and are accompanied by the main decade of respondents' school age experiences. Our findings begin by considering the women's memories of opportunities to experience football at school, before moving on to address the role of the family in young girls' sporting involvement.

### **Opportunities to experience football at school**

Williams (2003, p. 28) describes how 'the lack of organised school-based play for girls has undoubtedly been a major factor in encouraging women *not* to play football for over a century'. These data suggest that whilst there are some generational differences in opportunities to play organised football at school, gendered inequalities persisted across the three generations of women. Only half of the football fans in the younger group agreed that they had had opportunities to play football at school. These respondents had themselves played to varying levels and for varying amounts of time: Rachael, an occasional attendee at Leicester City matches (age 23, 1990s) had played at County level. Eight out of 10 of the younger group of football fans had experienced *playing* football for either an organised school team or in a less formal setting as a pickup game (a 'kickabout') organised by the players themselves. Katie described how many of her female friends had not developed an

interest in football which could be largely attributed to the relative lack of opportunities for girls' to play football at school:

It may have been completely different if they had had a girl's football team, girls would think oh football team, I'll give it a go. But if there's not that option, then they just tend to go away from the sport. [...]. None of us ever thought to go and play or even ask about oh you know, a girls football team. It just never entered the mind, we played hockey, but never to play football, but [be]cause I think the boys had got a team, it never entered oh perhaps get a girls team. It was always netball and hockey. (Katie, age 26, 1990s, STH)

For middle group and older group fans, there had been fewer opportunities to play football at school. Twenty-four of the 25 middle group football respondents talked about a clear gender divide in physical education at school which effectively prohibited them from playing football. They described in a matter-of-fact way how: 'It was definitely male and female sports then' (Zena, age 38, 1980s, STH), hence, 'Boys played football and rugby and girls played hockey and netball and that was it' (Denise, age 48, 1970s, STH). There was also a strong sense among these respondents that at school sporting options were 'very much orientated towards the boys' (Sophie, age 42, 1980s, STH).

All respondents in the older group stated that playing football *at school* was not an option for them as schoolgirls in the 1940s and 1950s. But at the same time in both the middle and older groups a number of women did discuss having a 'kickabout', often with 'lads' at lunchtimes in the school playground, or on the streets, or with male relatives, as had been the case for some of the younger group fans. These women's claims might modify, to an extent, recent research suggesting that even in the playground girls are typically excluded from playing football (Swain, 2000). On the other hand, Clark and Paechter's (2007) study found that while a minority of girls participated in playground football they often played on the margins of the game, both in terms of their occupation of space and their status as 'players'.

We might conclude then that there seems to be a relationship of sorts between the women's interest in playing football during school age years and becoming a football *fan*. But for the middle and older groups there was rarely if ever the opportunity to actually play the game at school, a matter we consider in more detail below. In the wider project only one of the 85 women interviewed had any experience of *playing* rugby. However, some rugby fans did discuss playing informal games of football. Although women's and girls' football has in the last decade witnessed a major expansion, Scraton's (1997) observations that prior to this period football was forbidden to girls in favour of sports such as field hockey and netball appear to be reflected in these interviews with the middle and older groups – women who experienced school physical education from the 1940s through to the 1980s. During this period, other sports regularly mentioned by the women included athletics, rounders and tennis. Thus, many respondents – especially in the older generations – had been offered opportunities to play sports at school which idealise or were considered conducive to the maintenance of a particular view of 'femininity' (Lenskyj, 1988, p. 239).

### **'Type' of school as a barrier to play**

Many of the women from the middle and older groups were also keen to stress the specific *type* of school they attended as a barrier to playing what they described as 'male' sports. The 1944 Education Act introduced the 11 plus exam, dividing pupils into secondary grammar schools and secondary modern or secondary technical schools (Pole, 2001). Issues surrounding sporting opportunities and types of school were not frequently discussed by the younger group, who had not experienced this tripartite system of schooling.

For a number of middle and older group respondents, their attendance at an all-girls *grammar* school, with its class and status concerns, was argued to have effectively excluded even the possibility of contact sports such as football for girls. The game of netball, for instance, developed by the Ling Association of Gymnastics Teachers in the 1890s, was an intentionally feminised version of basketball in which physical contact and rough play was absolutely forbidden (McCrone, 1987).

The women from the middle and older groups attended school in an era in which biological claims that women were unsuited to participate in vigorous physical activity (Kidd, 1990) would still have held significant influence. In this context and influenced by the wider ideologies in play from the 1950s to 1970s about gender and education, playing football (or indeed anything involving too much physical exertion) simply could not have been on the schooling agenda. This is despite England hosting and winning the FIFA World Cup in 1966 which generated an interest in football among women as players and spectators (Woodhouse, 1991), and the formation of the Women's Football Association (WFA) in 1969 which initially had 44 affiliated clubs (Lopez, 1997). Yet football would not have been considered, in the respondents' view, 'womanly', which explains the highly expressive reactions from women even to the suggestion that they might as girls have played the 'male' team sports they now followed:

GOOD LORD NO! NO, NO, NO. No way. We weren't allowed to do it. (Fiona, age 56, 1970s, Member)

Oh God no, girls didn't play football, absolutely not! They just didn't, it was a boys' game. (Samantha, age 64, 1960s, STH)

All-girls grammar schools meant bringing up 'ladies', thus instilling certain rituals, codes and understandings concerning 'appropriate' female behaviour. Adjectives such as 'traditional' were often used when describing the defining girls' grammar school ethos, and there was a

definite sense that, ‘Girls were still considered to be ladylike in those days’ (Fiona, age 56, 1970s, Member). Clearly most girls’ education in this period helped to reinforce a traditional form of middle-class femininity. Making explicit the connection between the women’s remembered school experiences and the practices that shaped them, Hargreaves (1994, p. 152) has described how this was a time when ‘the ideology of gender difference and education for motherhood was integral to educational theories and practice’.

Even for those young girls’ attending co-educational secondary modern schools, the middle and older group women described how generally boys and girls did not ‘mix’ much at school and certainly not in physical education lessons. Respondents who had attended these schools were also, like their grammar school counter-parts, clearly restricted in the sports they could play during physical education. But they were at least able to play football at lunchtimes with boys. For women at single sex and mixed schools, opportunities to watch boys playing those sports which were strictly prohibited to them, could have aroused a wider interest in sports such as football and rugby. For example, season ticket holder Jane (age 37, 1980s) described how her attendance at an all-girls ‘posh’ school meant that she only had access to female appropriate sports, but she suggested: ‘If I’d have gone to mixed school I probably would have got into football a lot earlier I think, just because boys would be playing football’. Yet teachers’ resistance to girls’ involvement in so-called ‘male’ sports was apparent even when spectating at boys’ school matches. The strength of this anti-female football and rugby attitude is well illustrated by rugby respondent Anita’s experiences:

Often on a Saturday when we’d finished playing hockey we’d go and watch the boys playing football or rugby. They [teachers] did allow us to do that, but there weren’t many of us there then [...]. I mean even when we used to stand and watch the boys “Don’t you think you’re going to get involved in that” was sort of the attitude you used to get. [Be]cause the boys school was on the same grounds as ours but they went up one side of the path and we had to go up the other side of the path and never the twain shall meet. (*Anita, age 62, 1960s, rugby union STH*)

## Popular ideologies and demands for equal opportunities

The divisions between the sexes at school and beyond seemed to fit with popular ideologies in the first half of the twentieth century. For Fiona, the supposed post-war transformation of gender relations from the 1950s on seems to have had little impact on her own experience of schooling:

It just wasn't a girl's thing...You just, girls didn't do it [play sport] in those days. Boys didn't do cookery. They do now, but it was a different world then. It was [...] boys go to work, girls stay at home and raise the children. It was very different [...]. I talk as though I'm from the Victorian times, don't I? But this is only in the (19)60s I'm talking about. (*Fiona, age 56, 1970s, Member*)

Many of the middle and older group respondents related the restrictions placed on them in 'male' sport and their own relative passivity in response, with comments such as: 'You just accepted it' (Pam, age 35, 1980s, STH), or 'You're going back a long time you see. You're going back to the late 50s, early 60s...football wouldn't even be on the radar, it was hockey or netball or tennis' (Gillian, age 60, 1960s, STH). Velija and Kumar (2009) have described how some activities in physical education currently remain distinctly gendered, with girls unable to access football due to the persistent assumption that this sport is not appropriate for girls. For some of the younger group fans in the study who could not play football at school there was also a sense that this was the way 'it had always been' (Louisa, age 27, 1990s, STH), and so this supposed 'natural' gender order was not strongly questioned by some, even among the women who attended school as recently as the 1990s.

Whereas playing 'male' sports such as football in the school setting can contribute to the development of boys' masculine identity, Jeanes (2005) suggests that for girls' their femininity may be defined by *not* playing football. Despite the fact that they were football fans, some of the women in this study seem to have accepted that women should not *play* 'men's sports', including football. This would seem to suggest that normative forms of

proscription from physical education teachers (along with parents and peers) had successfully socialized many young girls into accepting these gender roles.

Studies have reported how some teacher unwillingness to support girls in playing football continues to ensure its male dominance (Swain, 2000; Welford & Kay, 2007). In this study, a large number of the interviewees made references to how physical education teachers viewed sports such as football and rugby as ‘mens’ sports’. Some of the women reported that throughout their schooling, teachers had imposed the belief that as *girls* they were physically inferior and so were at greater risk of physical harm if they tried to engage in typically masculine defined activities. This would seem to reflect naturalistic theories of women’s physical inferiority and an ideology of male biological superiority (Crossett, 1990). One woman described how, when she was at primary school and played football in the playground with boys, she was: ‘Told that I shouldn’t be because I was too small and I might get knocked over and hurt myself’ (Marie, age 40, 1980s, STH). A number of others also felt they were conditioned into accepting physical education teachers’ beliefs that boys were inherently ‘rougher than girls’ (Anita, age 35, 1980s, occasional attendee) and that they (girls) were not ‘as physically strong as the boys’ (Fiona, age 56, 1970s, Member).

Some of the women expressed frustration or regret as they reflected on their gendered school experiences of physical education. Anita (age 35, 1980s, occasional attendee) felt ‘annoyed’ that girls were not given the opportunity to play football. For Janice (age 53, 1970s, occasional attendee): ‘I don’t think the teachers in those days would have even contemplated girls playing football or rugby [...]. I wish I was twenty years younger and I could play now’. Mary (age 70, 1950s, STH) also described how, in comparison to sporting opportunities today for young females, there was a feeling that: ‘You’ve missed out a bit somewhere’.



Lenskyj (1986) describes how the feminist movement of the 1960s helped to bring to public attention the issue of female participation in contact sports, although demands for equal opportunities for women in sport was one of the last issues to mobilize feminists. Some respondents were attending school during these years and may have been influenced by this politics of equality. For Samantha (age 64, 1960s, STH) ‘In the [19]60s and [19]70s, you were much more aware then of what was going on. And feminism and you know the sort of female rights and stuff like that came. But even so, it’s taken a long time for girls to be accepted in football’. In a small number of cases, some women had actively *opposed* the gendered division of sports (or at least had tried to) at school and elsewhere. Fiona was one of those who had actively rejected her alleged biological inferiority (Hargreaves, 1987):

I actually fought; I was one of the campaigners at my school for girls to be allowed to do cross country [...]. We were told we can’t do cross country [be]cause we were not as physically strong as the boys. So I said right, give us a chance, put us in a race with the boys and out of I don’t know how many, I came third. And it proved the point. (*Fiona, age 56, 1970s, Member*)

Openly challenging gendered divisions in sport was not always successful, however, and there would appear to be a high level of continuity of experience across the generational groups represented in the study, as illustrated by Rosie’s more recent experiences. For her, the lack of access to playing football at school fuelled her determination to watch the sport:

The school definitely didn’t want the girls to play [football]. We did ask for a girls’ team at one point but they wouldn’t let us do it [...]. They really weren’t bothered. I mean you could tell...They were like: “Umm, do we have to?” It was a bit disappointing. They were kind of a bit stuck in their sexist ways...It was boys do this, girls do that, it wasn’t very nice [...]. From playing football at school, and then being told not to, it’s like... I kind of just went, well you know, if they’re not allowing me to play it then I’m definitely going to go and watch it. (*Rosie, age 20, late 1990s, early 2000s, STH*)

### **Body conscious girls, a culture of femininity and peer pressure**

Some women in the younger group reported that they had opportunities to participate in contact team sports at school in contrast to the older generations. However, a problem that was routinely discussed by the women was that even sporty girls ‘dropped off’ their sporting interests during teenage years. For Thorne (1993) gender separation peaks in early adolescence, and the women in this study discussed how they sometimes came under severe pressure from peers to stop playing sport. Some of the younger group respondents discussed how boys and girls would ‘drift apart at a certain age’ making it difficult for those who wanted to continue playing football because they were ‘stuck in the middle’ of this gender divide (Rosie, age 20, 2000s, STH). Welford and Kay (2007) have also noted that female football players experienced tensions between femininity and athleticism during their adolescent years, as these are often viewed by others as incompatible.

The idea that heterosexual teenage girls become interested in different things to boys – in appearance, friendships, dating and attracting boys as potential sexual partners for example – was mentioned by some women as a crucial moment in a potential sporting ‘career’. In the wider study, both football and rugby union fans listed ‘girlie things’ that teenage girls were supposed to be preoccupied with including: ‘make-up’, ‘hair’, ‘dolls’, ‘dogs’, and perhaps most importantly in this context ‘their bodies’. This emphasis upon appearance and body image for adolescent girls has been discussed elsewhere, and is consistent with the issues raised by the women in this study. For example, Oliver and Lalik (2001) show how girls’ desire for ‘beauty’ can be explained as a passport to be noticed by boys and accepted by other girls. Playing football was not perceived as a means for heterosexual females to attract males (Gorley *et al.*, 2003) as in the words of F8: ‘It’s not very glamorous when you’re running round the pitch with no make-up on covered in mud’.

Scraton (1996) in her early, important work in this area, discussed how women's experiences at adolescence centre upon a 'culture of femininity' which directly contradicts what is expected of girls in forms of physical education dominated by a competitive sport discourse. Further anxiety for girls can be caused by the revealing physical education uniform consisting of short skirts and tight tops, and also the trials of the changing room area, as some young women become increasingly uncomfortable about exposing their bodies to peers (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001; Velija & Kumar, 2009). O'Donovan and Kirk (2008) report how girls' perceived their femininity was under threat in what was regarded as a masculine site and so made frequent attempts to disobey the physical education department rules by wearing labelled clothing instead of the physical education kit, jewellery, make-up and not tying their hair up, their resistance producing conflict with teachers from the start of each class. Recalling their experiences of school, the women in this study expressed the same or similar concerns about appearance and the 'body consciousness' of adolescence:

That's part of being 14, 15 isn't it? [...] I don't know whether it's because they're very, very body conscious at that age. And they're probably more worried about what they're going to look like in a pair of shorts and trainers...It might sound a bit daft to you but that's how I was, I just really didn't want to do PE [be]cause I didn't want to be in a PE kit and I just didn't want to go swimming because I didn't want to be in a swimming costume. And I didn't want to break a nail and stuff (*laughs*). (*Helena, age 23, 1990s, STH*)

Helena now looks back on this period with regret; she could perhaps have carried on with long distance running and playing football to a higher level were it not for what she perceived to be the underlying influence of peer pressure. But as Helena's regret suggests, by the time girls are confident enough to stand up to such pressure and resist the constraints of acceptable femininities, it may be too late: they are in their 20s and beyond and active participation in sport may have already passed them by. The notion that some teenage girls are simply 'too preoccupied' with their body image and with fears about 'trial by showers' to contemplate

playing sport is supported by middle group respondent Deborah who described experiences of showering after physical education lessons in the 1970s:

Our PE teacher used to shove [th]em [girls] in the showers with the hockey stick (*laughs*). You can imagine, they were all teenage girls, and they had communal showers, and they were all bothered about their bodies...they'd always got make-up on and didn't want to get their hair wet. (*Deborah, age 51, 1970s, Member*)

In light of this kind of recollection of physical education, Deborah described how many of her classmates brought notes from parents to say that they were unable to take part in physical education. As Woodhouse and Williams (1999) argue, whereas heterosexual masculinities are somehow 'completed' by involvement in team sport (Jeanes, 2005), conventional femininities, grounded in particular, powerful, normative perspectives of the female body, are apparently threatened by it:

They [other girls] took the piss a bit, but it [playing football] was my hobby. It's not exactly like I'm obese am I? Well it's true; all the people that took the piss are fat now. (*Harriet, age 23, 1990s, Occasional attendee*)

Although none of the women who were active sports participants as girls explicitly cited pressure from friends as a key reason for dropping out of sport (Scruton, 1996), perhaps this occurred more subtly. If young females continued to play sports such as football they certainly had to deal with the consequences of being mocked and ridiculed in school and social settings, as O'Donovan (2003) found for girls' displaying competence in physical education lessons.

## **The role of the family in sporting involvement**

### *Discouraging girls' sporting involvement*

We found evidence that some of the women's parents took active measures to prevent their daughters' involvement in sport, even as fans. Sheryl (age 71, 1950s, occasional attendee) explained how she had been brought up by 'Victorian' parents, as she described them, and

her mother was opposed to her watching football. Denise (age 48, 1970s, STH) recalled how a cherished daughter watching football ‘concerned’ her mother, who encouraged her to dress in more ‘feminine’ clothing. Parallels can be drawn here perhaps with studies which show how female athletes have been pressed to demonstrate their ‘femininity’ and confirm their heterosexuality through appropriate dress and hair comportment (Welford & Kay, 2007). For the mother of Sabrina, her involvement in football as a *supporter* had certainly raised some very difficult questions:

Her daughter, who’d been what she would class as very well brought up, what the Dickens did she want to go to Middlesbrough for on a Wednesday night with a load of blokes? Why the Dickens was she watching football?... I can remember her saying to my dad “Why did you ever take her down [to football]?” [...]. I think she did start to wonder when I kept buying the shell suits and the shirts and things. “Well why don’t you wear *girl* (her emphasis) clothes? “Why don’t you wear something more ladylike?” (*Sabrina, age 46, 1970s, STH*)

Archer and Lloyd (2002) found considerable differences in the ways parents treated boys and girls, where boys were given sports equipment as presents while girls were usually given dolls and dressed in conventional pink clothing. Kane (2006) also describes how the literature in the area of gender and childhood studies has documented definite parental tendencies towards gendered treatment of children, including differential treatment of sons and daughters in selection of toys, clothing and children’s room décor.

The encouragement of this sort of behaviour from parents had its obvious impact in sporting choices. Middle group football respondents typically experienced both direct and indirect parental pressure to stop playing football and to make female friends. Charlie (age 37, 1980s, STH) played football with boys on the street until she was around 14, but she said this became less important to her when she made female friends, which her mum was ‘really pleased’ about. Deborah (age 51, 1970s, Member) laughed about her mother’s aims at encouraging conventional heterosexuality in the face of a threatening football interest: ‘Why

don't you get your hair permed and wear a skirt?' to which Deborah would reply, 'How can you play football in a skirt?'. Here key socializing agents including parents, physical education teachers and peers, were taking an active role in attempting to channel girls away from playing and watching 'male' sports such as football, clearly in the case of the women in this study, with little success.

#### *Male family members and sporting involvement*

As we have already noted, women's early experiences at school revealed that for the middle and older groups there was virtually no encouragement for girls' to become involved in football and even many of the younger group did not have opportunities to play football at school. So for some women in all three generations male family members (including fathers, granddads, brothers and cousins) often played a vital role in developing the women's interest in sport, whether this was encouraging them to play football and to learn the skills and techniques required, or providing opportunities for them to become involved as an active fan. Liston (2006) found that male role models and especially fathers played a key role in enabling females to participate in male-dominated sports such as football in Ireland and as noted previously a number of studies have highlighted the importance of males in recruiting females to sport as fans (Farrell *et al.*, 2011). Such findings are supported by the present study as males were found to play an important socialization role for female football fans across the three generations. Three-quarters (38/51) of women cited a male or males as being the key figure(s) in their becoming a fan, with the father being cited as the most influential figure for nearly half (23/51) of all the women. The following extracts reveal the importance of fathers in first initiating females' access to football as spectators for these 'in-the-blood' (Mewett & Toffoletti, 2011) supporters:

I just sort of picked up Leicester from my dad because my dad always supported them...And I said yeah, okay, let's go, and I absolutely loved it. (*Louisa, age 27, 1990s, STH*)

I always used to watch all sport with my dad...He took me down to Leicester when I was eight and I've hardly missed a game since. (*Sabrina, age 46, 1970s, STH*)

The first time my dad took me I think I was about 13. And I just absolutely loved it...I just remember that first game and it was just like, I don't know, it was just like magic. (*Samantha, age 64, 1960s, STH*)

Some women also suggested that not having a male sibling meant that they were able to gain privileged access to the football ground. It is unlikely that this would have been experienced if they had a brother, especially for those in the older generations, as the traditional father-son bonding would have prevailed. For Coddington (1997) football is gender exclusive – fathers will automatically take their sons to matches but may not think to take their daughters. In order to gain an interest in watching live sport, many of these women had been in the fortunate position that (usually male) relatives or friends' relatives had been prepared to take them to their first match as a child, sparking a lifelong passion. For those who were not able to attend matches in this way, their interest did not usually develop until they were adults, when they were often introduced to live football by male partners or friends. In Ruby's case, however, school physical education played an important role in developing her interest in watching team sports. Ruby described an unusual case of how she was initially recruited as a supporter via her all-girls school:

My first match was in 1968 when I was 15 and we had tickets given to the school [...]. It was 40 years ago which, you know, females and football didn't really go together so well then [...]. I'd never been to a football match because my dad was a rugby fan and a lot of us went for the first time. And I thought it was brilliant. I really enjoyed it and I've been a fan ever since. My friend that I went with, her dad used to go, so we got him to take us down every week. (*Ruby, age 54, 1960s, occasional attendee*)

## **Conclusion**

Given a paucity of research on female sport fans generally and a dearth of detailed empirical research on the role of young people's formative sporting experiences in shaping their wider engagement with sport, both as fans and participants, our purpose in this paper was to consider, from the perspective of three generations of female football fans, the factors that may have influenced their shared interest as supporters of Leicester City. We were interested in formative experiences at school and the role of the family in channelling young females into or away from sport.

We conclude that women's experiences in physical education and sport at school played an important though mostly negative role in influencing their interest in professional male football in adulthood. For some women, the lack of encouragement they received at school to become involved in football pushed them away from playing and/or spectating. The middle and older groups of women were actually forbidden from playing football at school and whilst there was evidence of some generational change for the younger group in terms of access to playing football at school, continuities were also apparent as only half of this younger group of women discussed opportunities to play football. This change may be an outcome of what Flintoff (2008) calls equality politics, but mere access alone was not enough to sustain engagement with football for most beyond fandom, as football players. Sexist teachers, concerned parents and peer pressure fed a culture of femininity and magnified a body consciousness, illustrating the sheer power of normative constructions of femininity to shape girls' engagements with sport and the continuity of this culture of femininity across a 60 year period. But some women did find ways to resist gender norms and challenged such restrictive constructions of acceptable femininities, for example, by challenging policy at school in order to gain access to playing sport. Such experiences are likely to have played a



part in influencing their interest in football as fans. Our findings demonstrate the multiplicity of factors that played a role in women becoming fans and thus that there is not one pathway into sports fandom for women. Clearly there is a need for further research to examine the complexities of female fans' early socialization experiences.

Furthermore, we would expect men's football to be a paradigm case of a masculine competitive sport discourse. Harris (2004) describes how the sport continues to be viewed as 'an exclusively male domain'. But the women's enthusiasm for the game prompts us, along with Flintoff (2008), to consider the complexity of young people's engagement with school physical education and sport more generally. We suggest, tentatively, that the women's perception of football is not automatically aligned with a form of sport discourse they find discordant or alienating. In other words, we cannot in any simple way 'read-off' men's professional football as an automatically hegemonic form of sport discourse, at least not for the 24% of Leicester City supporters who are women. It is neither the individuals (i.e. 'girls'), as Flintoff (2008) notes, nor we would add is it the activity (i.e. football') that are in themselves 'the problem' in girls' formative experiences, but the complex interaction of a range of factors that centre on the school as an institution, the place of physical education and sport within it, and the dominant gender order that is reproduced in this context.

Consequently, we think this study supports Flintoff's (2008) claim that a politics of equity in physical education and sport by itself cannot influence in any substantial way the dominant gender order. At the same time, we propose that a majority of girls' and women's disengagement from sport participation and fandom cannot be explained solely by the alienating effects of a discourse of competitive masculinity. The work of Siedentop (2002) and others on Sport Education suggests that the ways in which sport is presented to young

people in school can positively influence the terms of their engagement with discourses of competitive sport. Moreover, we conclude that the family and in particular male (and perhaps increasingly female) role models within the family are arguably likely to play a decisive part in facilitating girls' initial positive engagements with sport as both fans and participants. We agree with Flintoff (2008) that a politics of transformation is required, however, in which the gender order itself becomes a pedagogical subject in schools and in families, if girls' formative experiences of sport are to be positive and empowering and prepare the ground for lifelong engagement as fans and perhaps also as participants.

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